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The Counter-Cultural Church: An Analysis of the Neo-Anabaptist Contribution to Missional Ecclesiology in the Post-Christendom West

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Abstract

In response to the ongoing secularization of the West, much missiological reflection on the church has turned to post-foundationalist, pragmatic and traditioned approaches culminating in a 'counter-cultural' model of the church. This model, developed most extensively in neo-Anabaptist contributions, is believed to contain rich promises for missionary ecclesiology in a post-Christendom age. In this article several traditions that have contributed to this approach are examined, with an emphasis on neo-Anabaptism – especially the works of Yoder and Hauerwas. A critical discussion of the model's idealism and view of culture follows. Based on this analysis, the article discusses how the model of the counter-cultural church can contribute to Christian mission in the secularized societies of the West.

Keywords

post-Christendom – counter-cultural church – neo-Anabaptism – missional ecclesiology – monasticism

1 Introduction

In the second half of the twentieth century opinion leaders became increasingly aware that the Enlightenment and so-called 'modernity' were to a large

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extent still working within the Christendom assumption of one powerful narrative as the foundation and the ultimate explanation of knowledge and morality. The end of the colonial empires and the ensuing emancipation of non-Western perspectives, together with the deep pluralization of Western societies, have inaugurated a search for 'post-foundationalist', 'pragmatic', and 'traditioned' ways of thinking. In theology and missiology, this quest has generated a series of partly overlapping attempts to respond to the loss of generally accepted frameworks of knowledge. In the field of ecclesiology the 'counter-cultural' model of the church may be the most explicit representative of this development. It has gained much popularity among those who reflect on the secularization of Western cultures and the (missionary) response that is expected from the church.² Its main characteristics are: first, that Christianity is not a universalizing narrative that can be rendered intelligible and relevant for all of society, but rather a particular story rooted in a concrete history of God's people and accessible only through conversion and initiation; second, that the Christian message is not vindicated by its results in society or by its correspondence to generally accepted standards of rationality but by the life of the Christian community; and therefore, third, that the church's crucial mission is to form a holy people, a congregation that truthfully represents what the gospel is about in the face of an unbelieving world.

This article presents a description and missiological evaluation of this model, with an emphasis on its neo-Anabaptist contributors.³ By and large, I will argue that the counter-cultural approach to the church offers important perspectives on Christianity's minority mission in the contemporary West, but that it eventually comes up short as a missiological approach to secularized culture, because of its idealistic approach to the church and its rather abstract view of the relationship between the church and the world. However, I will

2 The literature is abundant, and some of it will be referred to in the next sections. See, for example, the so-called 'Church after Christendom' series, edited by Alan Kreider and Stuart Murray. See also J. B. Nikolajsen, *The Distinctive Identity of the Church: A Constructive Study of the Post-Christendom Theologies of Lesslie Newbigin and John Howard Yoder* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

3 A more or less separate contribution to viewing the church as a 'culture' is found in the ecumenical movement, where (drawing a.o. from the Orthodox tradition) the church being a particular 'culture' is bound up with the church as a continuous community through time. See J. G. Flett, *Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), pp. 103–137 for discussion. While I focus here on the neo-Anabaptist strand in this ecclesiology (which addresses particularly the local congregation in the post-Christendom West), much of Flett's criticism pertains to this approach as well, as will appear below.

agree that it does highlight a crucial dimension of the church that must be retained in the late-modern West.

2 Background and Description

2.1 *Post-Liberalism and the 'Benedict Option'*

This approach to missional ecclesiology is a family rather than one single model. Different overlapping theological streams have fed into it. One strand is formed by representatives of the Yale Divinity School, such as George Lindbeck and the early Stanley Hauerwas.⁴ Based on their readings of Karl Barth⁵ and Ludwig Wittgenstein these theologians rejected the Liberal Protestant desire to correlate the universal needs and desires of humanity with the teachings of Christianity. This would inevitably lead to the erosion of Christianity, as liberal theologians prioritize the current situation and contemporary questions, and 'adjust their vision of the kingdom of God accordingly'.⁶ Instead, George Lindbeck claims that 'religions resemble languages together with their correlative forms of life and are thus similar to cultures (...) that is, as idioms for the construing of reality and the living of life'.⁷ This 'cultural-linguistic' theory of religion thus holds that Christianity (or any religion) is like a language, that can only be acquired through initiation and training. Moreover, Christianity does not make sense outside a specific life-form through which reality is observed, defined and explained. To Lindbeck, this approach to religion is counter-cultural, in the sense that it refuses to sacrifice the particular grammar and vocabulary of Christianity to a search for 'relevance'. The world is to be suspected; if it is allowed to ask the questions to which the gospel is to respond, it will change the gospel into something entirely else. Rather than trying to make Christianity relevant to non-Christians by translating it into their worldviews, Christianity creates its own 'world'.⁸

A somewhat similar response to the loss of Christendom, although coming from a different angle and explored in a different field of expertise, is the

4 As for the 'lasting imprint' of Yale on Stanley Hauerwas, see M. Thiessen Nation, 'Stanley Hauerwas: Where Would We Be Without Him?', in: M. T. Nation and S. Wells (eds), *Faithfulness and Fortitude: In Conversation with the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), pp. 19–39, at p. 29.

5 While Karl Barth was a Reformed theologian, his ecclesiology followed a free-church pattern. See K. Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

6 G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 125–126.

7 Ibid., pp. 16–17.

8 Ibid., p. 127.

attempt by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre to rethink the Western moral tradition in his *After Virtue* (1981) and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988). MacIntyre notes that our capacity for making moral judgements has become seriously confused as the result of the crumbling of a generally shared context of 'practical beliefs and supporting habits of thought, feeling and action'.⁹ Modernity has tried to remedy this confusion by searching for other ways to achieve sufficient consensus in moral reasoning. These attempts must now be considered as failed, since modernity has not led to any agreed way to solve moral questions. MacIntyre's argument entails that we must accept that there is no such thing as a morality or rationality independent of concrete, traditioned ways of life. The culture of modernity can only be assessed from the standpoint of a separate tradition that is rooted in different intuitions and practices than modernity itself. This tradition MacIntyre finds in Aristotelianism or, more precisely, in Thomism. Yet, however rich and clever his criticism of modernity is, in the end MacIntyre concludes that the fragmented culture of modernity may already have lost the ability to understand this voice from a tradition other than its own. Here he points to the historical role of the monasteries in the so-called 'Dark Ages' after the decline of the Western Roman empire. Like Lindbeck he mentions concrete communities as the contexts where alternative life-forms must be developed so as to give birth to 'morality and civility'. In his words: we are waiting 'for another (...) St. Benedict'.¹⁰

MacIntyre's advocacy of counter-cultural communities, together with a very critical approach to the modern world, has influenced Christian writers like Jonathan Wilson, David Bentley Hart and Rod Dreher. Following MacIntyre's critique, Wilson asserts that the church has become captive to modernity and he proposes a rethinking of church and mission along the lines of what he calls a 'new monasticism' for 'the whole people of God'.¹¹ Hart, in his *Atheist Delusions*, expresses the hope that after the collapse of Christendom the monasticism of the Dark Ages 'may perhaps again become the model that Christians will find themselves compelled to emulate'.¹² A similar antithetical approach to the modern world is found in Rod Dreher's recent *The Benedict Option*, a book that can hardly be understood without reference to the disappointment among American conservatives about their lack of success in the culture wars

9 A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. i.

10 Ibid., p. 238.

11 J. R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's After Virtue* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1997), pp. 68–70.

12 D. B. Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 241.

against abortion, drugs, and same-sex marriage. According to Dreher, 'serious Christian conservatives (...) have to develop creative, communal solutions to help us hold to our faith and our values in a world growing ever more hostile to them'.¹³ Here we find a somewhat different tone, bordering on resentment. Apparently, the counter-cultural option can be based on a principled critique of Christendom, but also on the desire to cling to some form of it, even if only in a gated community.

2.2 *The Neo-Anabaptist Contribution*

The most influential voice in the counter-cultural choir may be the revival of Anabaptist theology in the works of John Howard Yoder, James McClendon and (again) Stanley Hauerwas. In different ways these authors draw their inspiration from sixteenth-century Anabaptism, re-assembling it for the church's mission in our age (hence, 'neo-anabaptism'). It is impossible within the scope of this article to do justice to the vast literature that proposes Anabaptist theology as an essential contribution to Christian mission in the West.¹⁴ However, by and large I believe that the following three characteristics give a fair impression.¹⁵

First, studies inspired by Anabaptism *reject the union between church and state* that was forged within Christendom. This union leads the church to understand itself erroneously as the moral department of a 'Christian' society, and as an institution that somehow bears responsibility for the future of the state. This in turn leads to a concentration on speaking 'relevantly' and 'realistically', with the inevitable consequence that the church gives up its own Christian vocabulary out of a desperate desire to remain in control.¹⁶ The fundamental problem with this 'constantinianism' (Yoder) is its assumption that the meaning of history lies in the world rather than in the church, and that it is therefore crucial for the church to find out where the world is going. Rather than trying to be *effective*, says Yoder, Christians should try to be *obedient* to

13 R. Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), p. 2.

14 For an extensive missiological analysis of the historical Anabaptist movement in Europe, see my *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), pp. 62–65.

15 Here I summarize my description of the Anabaptist polemic against Christendom in my *Vrede stichten: Politieke meditaties* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2007), pp. 254–262.

16 S. Hauerwas, 'On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological' (1983), in J. Berkman and M. Cartwright (eds), *The Hauerwas Reader*, 2nd edition (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 51–74.

Christ in a world that they cannot and need not control.¹⁷ The world is in God's hands, not ours. Therefore, the church's primary missional strategy is not to try to influence this world, but to be a witness to the *new* world of which it is a foretaste.¹⁸

Second, studies inspired by Anabaptism emphasize that Christians *should not expect too much from earthly politics*. Governments and societal institutions are part of what the New Testament calls 'powers'. These powers are created by God (Col. 1:15–17), but they have rebelled against him (Eph. 2:1, etc.; Gal. 4:1–11). In his earthly ministry Jesus resisted and unmasked these powers, represented by religious and political authorities. Jesus did this not by violence, but by leading a life of complete obedience to God through proclamation, healing, teaching, exorcism, gathering disciples, rejecting political power, and finally taking the path of the cross. Jesus' resurrection, however, does not mean that the powers are destroyed. Until Jesus' return they live an ambiguous existence; they are tolerated as representatives of 'this age', but they are not agents of salvation. Political order is established and sustained by God for the time being (Rom. 13:1–4), but it does not have a future in his kingdom. The church has the task of being a witness to the new 'politics' of God's eschatological order, and to remind the powers that be of their temporality, their rebellion, and their inevitable demise.¹⁹ Therefore, the traditional stance of Anabaptist Christians has been to refuse political office or military service. Even though these institutions play a role in God's rule of the world in this dispensation, their use of deadly violence and coercion characterizes them as representatives of the old order that is destined for destruction. To be sure, all this does not necessarily mean that Anabaptist theologians are blind to any influence of Christ outside the church.²⁰ It basically means that they leave the world to Christ, and trust him to rule it properly without the interference of the church. Also, Anabaptist theologians certainly accept that the church, by being faithful to its witnessing

- 17 J. H. Yoder, 'Let the Church Be the Church', in id., *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 177: 'The Christian community is the only community whose social hope is that we need not rule because Christ is Lord.'
- 18 Cf. J. H. Yoder, 'The Believers' Church and the Arms Race', in id., *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 159: 'We can't leave the world in peace with its commitment to other standards.'
- 19 Cf. J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 135–162. See also J. McClendon Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology I* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986), pp. 173–176.
- 20 See, e.g. Yoder, 'Believers Church', pp. 150–153; S. Hauerwas, 'A Christian Critique of Christian America' (1986), in Berkman and Cartwright, *The Hauerwas Reader*, pp. 459–480, at p. 471.

task, will have an impact in the world. But this is not part of a 'strategy', nor is it the justification of the church's existence.²¹

A third characteristic of Anabaptist theology is its emphasis on *the church as a holy and visible community of believers*. One of the problematic aspects of the Christendom era was its construal of the church as the religious dimension of the secular state. Then the only way to maintain some vision of the holiness of the church was to adopt the idea of a timeless 'invisible' church hovering over the concrete church on earth (Protestants), or to connect the holiness of the church with its formal nature as the mediator of salvation (Roman Catholics). Anabaptist theologians reject these ideas; the church is a concrete and local congregation of Christians who have pledged themselves to obedience. This church is a culture in itself, characterized by kingdom practices like pacifism, love, simplicity, friendliness, hospitality, and so on.²² As far as the church goes, this is all there is; the local communities of believers are the universal church of Christ in *diaspora*. They are resident aliens who 'seek the peace of the city', but not through political or cultural control.²³ What makes Christianity unique is not the fact that it is a faith as such, but that it is a unique community. Christian beliefs about God, Jesus, sin, humanity and salvation are only intelligible against the background of a church – a community of people who have been set apart from the world with the task of worshipping a God whom the world does not know.²⁴ Especially by being itself and by concentrating on shaping a Christian life-style the church makes an offer to the world; it represents God's order, it displays an alternative practice. 'Only a believing community with a "thick" particular identity has something to say to whatever "public" is out there to address.'²⁵

In the remainder of this article I will first evaluate the neo-Anabaptist contribution to the counter-cultural church 'model', and then return to its MacIntyrian dimension in a somewhat different way.

- 21 Stanley Hauerwas, 'Why the "Sectarian Temptation" is a Misrepresentation: A Response to James Gustafson' (1988), in Berkman and Cartwright, *The Hauerwas Reader*, pp. 90–110, at p. 105. See also J. H. Yoder, 'Christ the Hope of the World', in Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood*, p. 215.
- 22 Cf. R. Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as a Culture in a Post-Christian World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996). For this talk of the church as a 'culture' (in the 'high-church' version advocated by Robert Jenson), see also Flett, *Apostolicity*, pp. 115–128.
- 23 J. H. Yoder, 'To Serve Our God and to Rule the World', in id., *The Royal Priesthood*, pp. 133–135.
- 24 S. Hauerwas, 'On Keeping', p. 72. See also his *After Christendom: How the Church Is to Behave if Freedom, Justice and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas*, 2nd edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press: 1999), pp. 23–44.
- 25 J. H. Yoder, 'The New Humanity as Pulpit and Paradigm', in id., *For the Nations*, p. 42.

3 Evaluating the Counter-Cultural Church

3.1 *The Lasting Contribution of Neo-Anabaptism*

Currently, the Anabaptist revival may be the most important and influential contribution to the conversation about Christian mission in a post-Christian society.²⁶ It is easy to see its relevance. After all, these neo-Anabaptist theologians point out, there have always been churches who thought that they lived in a 'pagan' society, even in the heyday of Christendom. These churches have been marginalized and persecuted, but they are the best evidence that there has always been an awareness among Christians that church and world are not necessarily friends – not even in so-called 'Christian' societies. In other words, Neo-Anabaptism gives voice to the suppressed alternative Christian tradition within Christendom. It cannot be denied, in my opinion, that especially this 'free church' tradition has kept the memory of the essentially apostolic and evangelizing task of the church in the world, even in times and places where this world is widely considered as sufficiently Christianized.

Also its radical and justified criticism of theocracy – the idea that political power is the primary instrument for Christians to change the world – deserves to be heard. Its vision of evangelism as, first and foremost, an apologia for Christian communal life,²⁷ is a lasting contribution to Christian mission in the West. Finally, its unmasking of the desperate search for 'relevance' and 'realism' among Christians as a betrayal of authentic Christian witness, is crucial in a secularizing society. If Christians have nothing to tell that the world does not know already, they will end up by offering cumbersome and esoteric versions of what the world is perfectly able to express in much clearer and attractive words. In short, Anabaptists retain the crucial theological distinction between 'church' and 'world' that is largely ignored in the European folk church tradition. All this should be kept in mind when reading the critique of the counter-cultural church, to which we now turn.

26 Good popularizing examples are the books of the British theologian Stuart Murray, such as *Church after Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004) and *Post-Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004). From a more North-American perspective, see S. McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014); S. W. Green and J. R. Krabill (eds), *Fully Engaged: Missional Church in an Anabaptist Voice* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2015).

27 For an extensive missiological defence of this position, see B. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007).

3.2 *Idealism and Conformity*

A critical analysis of the counter-cultural church might begin with pointing to the deeply idealistic character of this 'model'.²⁸ One version of this idealism is found in the tendency to connect the cultural dimension of the church with 'a linear and singular church history ... rendering any local development dependent on the entrance of the Western church'.²⁹ In other words, if the church is a 'culture' into which newcomers (including new peoples, tribes and cultures) must be 'initiated', institutional continuity is subtly prioritized over diversity and equality. In terms of mission this means that the inherited institution is always the standard, rendering newcomers at a disadvantage.

The same 'colonialism' might play out on the local level of the congregation, which is the level that receives the most attention from neo-Anabaptist authors. If the church is really to be a 'community of character',³⁰ a place where Christians are trained in the virtues and habits of the culture that is the church, then this would require a very strong, intense community indeed. Such a church would not just meet on Sundays but also during the week; it would ask its members to be very transparent about their lives (also about what in most Western societies is considered as 'private'); it would try to limit the degree of pluralism and diversity in the church; and it would expect the membership to be willing to submit to the authority of the church leaders, or the congregational meeting. After all, this level of 'formation' does not come about merely by coming together once a week (if that), while listening to a sermon and sharing communion.

While acknowledging much that is good and important in this movement, my concern is the extent to which it creates conformity to a group, rather than to Christian character, and obedience to the leadership of the church, rather than to Christ. This is a difficult issue indeed, and one that is not independent of the observer's taste and personality, but there should be awareness of the social dynamics that make congregations 'very conforming places', and of the remedies against it, such as welcoming dissent and the empowering of minority influence.³¹ When I try to imagine churches that operate in

28 For this type of criticism, see e.g., N. Healy, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), pp. 78–85, 95–99, 101, etc.; R. Gill, *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), esp. pp. 13–30.

29 Flett, *Apostolicity*, p. 130; cf. p. 151.

30 S. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1981).

31 S. Savage, E. Boyd-MacMillan, *The Human Face of Church: A social psychology and pastoral theology resource for pioneer and traditional ministry* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2007), pp. 11, 13.

this highly formative way envisaged by neo-Anabaptists, I cannot but think of certain Dutch conservative Reformed denominations that are indeed very communal and character-forming, but also quite authoritarian and with lots of people who seem rather prejudiced and anxious about the modern world. This may be merely a matter of taste, but I believe that the very important issues of power and group conformity are insufficiently addressed by the advocates of the counter-cultural community.³² This might be remedied by a series of good ethnographic studies of congregations that are successful at creating counter-cultural, strongly formative communities while avoiding the pitfalls of unhealthy relations and authoritarianism.

3.3 Church and World

The idealistic neo-Anabaptist approach to the church as a separate community, defined by the new order of the kingdom of God, rather than by the world out of which it is called, easily creates the impression of a complete separation of 'church' and 'world'. Even if this may not be their intention at all, by their strongly systematic-theological approach of 'church' writers like Yoder and Hauerwas seem to suggest that the church can understand itself without reference to the world of which it is a part. However, the church is not solely a divine institution; it is a human institution as well and as such it is fully part of historical and cultural processes. As a theological question the church cannot be adequately described without reference to its historical, social and cultural reality.³³ To do this would be similar to trying to describe the institution of marriage purely theologically without consulting biology or culture. If church and world are separate cultures, we should remind ourselves that cultures are not isolated blocks; they are always interacting with each other. Thus Robin Gill, after an extensive study of sociological data in the United Kingdom, writes:

[T]here are broad patterns of Christian beliefs, teleology and altruism which distinguish churchgoers as a whole from non-churchgoers. It has been seen that churchgoers have, in addition to their distinctive theistic and christocentric beliefs, a strong sense of moral order and concern for

32 Cf. Mark Mason's critical discussion in 'Living in the distance between a "community of character" and a "community of the question"', in L. Nelstrop and M. Percy (eds), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008), pp. 85–104.

33 This is a point often made in studies of theological ethnography. See, e.g., most of the contributions in P. Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

other people ... None of these differences is absolute. The values, virtues, moral attitudes and behaviour of churchgoers are shared by many other people as well. The distinctiveness of churchgoers is real but relative.³⁴

Moreover, even on those occasions when the distinction between church and world is emphasized, it would be far too simple to assume that the 'Christian' character of practices is defined in splendid isolation. Whatever is the 'Christian' thing to do and believe always needs to be constructed in a concrete time and place. For example, is eating beef 'Christian'? The answer is: that depends on where you are. In India, where cows are sacred, eating beef may very well be a bold Christian confession of freedom in Christ.³⁵ In many Western countries, however, the growing awareness of overconsumption and the often unethical 'production' of meat have led many Christians to become vegetarians. The point is: social practices (eating, drinking, dressing, relationships, gender-roles, consumption patterns, work) can only be understood in their context. Only if we know where we are and what is at stake here and now, can we know how these things are to be done in a 'Christian' way.

In other words, it is impossible to define Christian beliefs and practices without having a thorough engagement with our context, and without reflecting on the degree to which Christians themselves are 'made' by this context.³⁶ To some extent we cannot say what the church is if we do not know what the world is out of which the church is called. This may be particularly true in a post-Christian society where the church by its mission has generated an enormous amount of cultural memories and moral intuitions that are mirrored back to the church. Thus, some of the best and most challenging understandings of the Bible and Christian practice in a post-Christian society come from 'appropriations on the frontiers of the Church and beyond'.³⁷

34 Gill, *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics*, p. 197.

35 Or, of course, an especially egregious and unnecessary offence to one's neighbours. Nevertheless, the point is that the meaning of this practice cannot be worked out in isolation from the context.

36 For a more elaborate version of this argument, and other theological criticism of Anabaptism, see Paas, *Vrede stichten*, pp. 269–275.

37 R. Williams, 'The Judgement of the World', in id., *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 29–43, at p. 30. For such a 'chastened' vision of Christian spirituality and mission in a post-Christendom world, see for example A. H. Hart's *Strangers and Pilgrims Once More: Being disciples of Jesus in a post-christendom world* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014). For the kind of lessons that might be learned by a church that is willing to listen to those who are 'outside', see M. Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (Fordham, NY: Fordham University Press, 1998).

3.4 *An Over-Theological Approach to the Church*

The tendency to speak about the church in highly idealistic terms, in combination with a rather negative view of the world, may in fact seriously harm the church's mission. Ethnographic research, for example, suggests that Christian communities that excel in strong internal bonding and idealistic missional rhetoric may not be all that successful at establishing meaningful relationships with people outside the church.³⁸ Idealism can easily breed a rather abstract approach of the church, and its relationship to the world.

This may be illustrated by Yoder's response to the revelation of his systematic adultery and sexual abuse with more than 100 women.³⁹ While sexual abuse (sadly) happens in all sorts of organizations, religious or secular, Yoder's attempts to justify his behaviour are linked to his theology in concerning ways.⁴⁰ The idea that Christians can define themselves without reference to the world, or without learning much from it, may alienate Christians from certain human moral intuitions; it may breed a misguided aristocratic rejection of the wisdom of the 'world'. This may have devastating consequences, as Stanley Hauerwas argues in his recent reflection on Yoder's sexual abuse. One of Yoder's self-justifications was that any criticism of his predatory behaviour revealed 'the consensus of our respectable culture'. In other words, Yoder rejected criticism coming from outside the church as merely a reflection of secular middle-class values. Against this stance, Hauerwas points out that in a post-Christian culture many 'worldly' intuitions about marriage are not particularly secular at all. Moreover, there may be truth in the ancient notion of 'natural law', that is: true moral knowledge may come from outside the gospel. Hauerwas continues:

The point I am trying to make – a point not easily made – may entail a criticism of Yoder's work that I am only beginning to understand. I worry that Yoder may have made too extreme the duality between church and

38 P. Lichterman, *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge America's Divisions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), e.g., pp. 136–137, 256–257.

39 See, for example, R. W. Goossen, "Defanging the Beast": Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse', *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 (January 2015), pp. 7–80.

40 See, for example, D. Cramer *et al.*, 'Scandalizing John Howard Yoder', *The Other Journal* (July 7, 2014), on the structural similarity between Yoder's argument for pacifism and his justification for seemingly 'non-coerced' sexual abuse. Online: <https://theotherjournal.com/2014/07/07/scandalizing-john-howard-yoder/> (accessed December 15, 2017).

world, particularly when it comes to dealing with our everyday relations with one another.⁴¹

All this shows that the term 'counter-cultural' must be used with great care, as it can easily lead to rather misguided and even destructive conceptualizations of the relationship between church and world. Something of this also plays out in the field of mission, as we will now see.

4 The Counter-Cultural Church and Mission

4.1 *The Need for a More Flexible Relationship with the World*

It should be clear by now that Christian congregations are not parachuted out of the air (or out of the first century, for that matter), together with a complete set of beliefs and practices. This is also true for Anabaptist congregations, as European history clearly shows. Their 'culture' was connected with the surrounding culture in many ways. Anabaptism did not come forward as a Christian movement in a non-Christian world; in that sense it was not a return to the New Testament church. The 'counter-cultural' communities of the Anabaptists were *intensive* Christian communities in a *formally* Christian world. In this respect they may be best compared with the monasteries in the Middle Ages. Just like the monastic movements the Anabaptists were not outside the system, but they formed a counter-structure within the system.

This emphasis on separation does not preclude a missionary identity; both the monastic movement and early Anabaptism have demonstrated this beyond doubt. We have also seen that modern Anabaptists stress that the church separates itself from the world in order to witness to the world, and that it may trust that this witness will be heard now and then. Nevertheless, it strikes me in the writings of Yoder, Hauerwas and their disciples that the world is described in starkly negative terms.⁴² In all forms of this reinvented Anabaptism we find a strong, almost absolute opposition between the church and

41 S. Hauerwas, 'In Defence of "Our Respectable Culture": Trying to Make Sense of John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse', *ABC Religion & Ethics* (October 18, 2017). Online: <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2017/10/18/4751367.htm> (accessed December 15, 2017).

42 E.g., the strong negative rhetoric in S. Hauerwas and W. H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

the dominant culture.⁴³ As James Davison Hunter writes, 'In the writings of the neo-Anabaptist theologians, there is little good in the world that deserves praise and no beauty that generates wonder and appreciation'.⁴⁴ The 'world' in this literature is mostly an arena of power play, violence, capitalism, consumerism, oppression, and selfishness. There is really little good in it, and almost nothing to learn from it.

This may be true in some places and times. Perhaps it is important to stress this contrast also when nostalgia for Christendom and its accompanying culture wars is still very alive, and as such the neo-Anabaptist literature is a welcome prophetic voice in many areas of the West where Christians are still tempted by power. But is the world always such a bad place? What we need here is a more dynamic, contextually sensitive view of the relationship between church and world. Theologically, this would mean to stress the eschatological, future-oriented nature of the church travelling through space and time alongside its sociological nature as a separate group with a distinct culture. 'The contrast practices of the church with a truly ecclesial character are those that are not merely counter-cultural but also mark out a trajectory toward the abundance, impartiality, mutuality, forgiveness, joy and peace that characterizes the Reign of God that Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated'.⁴⁵ This eschatological orientation will lead to a flexible, contextually conscious engagement with the world. To me it seems that an Anabaptist ecclesiology is too dependent on a pessimistic picture of the world in which the church lives, and out of which it is made. In rejecting the theocratic vision of Christendom with its rigid optimism about the Christian character of the world, Anabaptism has embraced an equally rigid pessimism. For everyone who is seriously involved in mission work this is hard to digest.

In order to be really missional in a post-Christian world we must abandon timeless, supra-cultural constructions of the relationship between church and world – either theocratic or counter-cultural. Something is wrong with a Christian identity if it depends on almost entirely negative (or optimistic, for that matter) depictions of the world. Even the monasteries did not see themselves primarily as a 'counterculture', but as a radical department within a wider

43 In some ways this is also true for the ecumenical, institutional paradigm of the church-as-a-culture that is discussed by John Flett (engaging the ecclesiology of Robert Jenson). See, e.g. Flett, *Apostolicity*, p. 117 ('the church relates to the world through a clash of cultures').

44 J. D. Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 164.

45 C. B. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil: Theology and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 222.

Christianized society with different 'speeds'. Looking back on the Middle Ages and early modernity, we can observe that conversions to a monastic vocation or to the intensively Christian lifestyle of Anabaptism occurred against the background of a widely shared ideal of a Christian culture, and on the basis of the – albeit shallow – Christian formation of the largest part of the population. The early Anabaptists lived and formed their theology in a society where people believed in God, knew about Jesus, and to whom the Bible may have been largely unknown but not unloved. Moreover, in this culture there was a certain respect for a radical Christian lifestyle, even if this lifestyle was mostly admired from a distance. If 'counter-cultural' means a community that opposes the cultural values of its context, the Anabaptists were not counter-cultural at all. On the contrary, they embodied an intensive form of cultural values that were almost universally *endorsed* if not practised. Precisely that determined the force of their witness.⁴⁶

4.2 *Counter-Cultural Communities in a Post-Christian Society?*

Neo-Anabaptist theologians believe that Christian mission in a post-Christian society should be done by making the world the offer of a 'thick community', an alternative community that represents the future reality of God. This may make much sense from the inside out, as a systematic-theological concept, but from a missiological perspective the question is equally important how this community is perceived by the *world* – from the outside in, so to speak. In the radically pluralist societies of the late modern West, there is a persistent rejection of unifying grand narratives or national myths. The current social order is presented as simply the most efficient 'technique' to keep the peace and to produce prosperity for a population that is deeply divided on the level of values and worldviews. Thus, in the words of Rowan Williams, modern societies 'can evade the question of *why* this social order should be respected, preserved and defended'. World-view differences are redefined as various 'life-styles', and are as such easily absorbed into the prevailing social order. 'In the context of these societies', Williams continues, 'indeed, *style* is everything: with massive commercial support, cultural options – even when their roots are in would-be

46 For a case study, see the fascinating description of local relations between Reformed and Anabaptist Christians in the seventeenth century Dutch village of Graft, by A. van Deursen, *Een dorp in de polder: Graft in de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1994). Clearly, the attitude of outsiders towards Anabaptists was not determined by animosity but rather by a form of reluctant admiration. In a sense, the Anabaptists did not remind the (Christianized) world around them of what it did *not* know (*pace* Hauerwas), but rather the contrary: they were an uncomfortable reminder of what it knew all along.

dissident groupings – are developed and presented as consumer goods. And religious belief is no exception.⁴⁷ The most likely response of late modern societies to so-called ‘counter-cultural communities’ is to trivialize them as examples of consumerist life-styles.

In other words, if Christians think that mission can and should happen through the creation of ‘thick’ communities alone, they should think again. To do that would simply reinforce the secular absence of a common good, it would amount to abandoning the vision of a redeemed world. Clearly, there is no way for the counter-cultural tradition to avoid the question of Christian public discourse, of Christian participation in the world of politics, science, and the arts. Only in combination with a public discourse that is somehow influenced by Christian notions (however fragmentary), can the witness of strong, counter-cultural Christian communities make an impression on the world.⁴⁸

In a deeply secularized culture, churches that draw their inspiration from Anabaptism, will have to respond to a completely different cultural context. An anachronistic appeal to the presumably counter-cultural character of the early Anabaptists will be counter-productive; it will only lead to a disruption of communication with a post-Christian environment. In my opinion this means two things for the Anabaptist path to be fruitful in a secular society.

First, in their relations with other churches Anabaptistically inspired churches are not to present themselves as a ‘counter-culture’ but as an ‘intensive’ culture. In other words, they should not play the sectarian card, but the monastic card.⁴⁹ Here we return, with some qualifications, to the MacIntyrean strand within the counter-cultural approach to the church (the ‘Benedict option’). Viewed from this perspective, the various movements of ‘new monasticism’ seem a worthy and missionally relevant heir of this Radical Reformation tradition.⁵⁰ Such movements do not present themselves so much as a totalizing ecclesiastical model (not every Christian is expected to become a monk), but as an opportunity for Christians to radically commit themselves to an ideal of discipleship by keeping a certain distance from late modern culture of consumption. Such Christian communities serve their cities and display to the rest of the church an ideal of radical discipleship and prophetic critique, without separating the bond that connects them with other churches. There

47 Williams, ‘Judgement’, pp. 34–35.

48 Cf. Williams, ‘Judgement’, p. 36.

49 See also my *Church Planting in the Secular West*, pp. 226–229, on ‘free havens’.

50 See G. Cray *et al.* (eds), *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010); G. Marti and G. Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 19–21, 148–153.

are different, complementary ways of being a Christian, and some ways are more radical than others. Traditionally, this principle is mostly expressed in terms of vocations: one Christian has the vocation to remain single and to live without possessions, while the other is called to marry, to have children, and to start a business. Just like in the Old Testament, where the prophet Elijah and the courtier Obadiah both tried to live faithful lives in very different conditions (1 Kings 18:1–15). This presentation of ‘monasticism’ as a crucial *dimension* of the church, rather than its exclusive expression for our age, forms an important difference from the versions presented by MacIntyre, Hart, Wilson, and Dreher in section 2.1. More on this below.

Second, in their dealings with the world, modern Anabaptists will have to incorporate ‘transition zones’ in their church life; they will have to provide opportunities for people to gradually become part of the congregation. After all, in a deeply secularized world the church cannot simply wager on sudden conversions to a radical Christianity or hope for revivals among people to whom Christianity is as alien as cricket to a Russian. The early Anabaptists could profit from the gradual slopes that were present between their communities and the Christianized world around them; churches in the secularized West do not have that advantage. So, even ‘counter-cultural’ churches will have to create stepping-stones, ways of belonging without yet really believing or behaving. This they will have to connect with their traditional emphasis on holiness, which makes them face essentially the same challenges as the folk churches which they have rejected. Moreover, they will have to develop a vision for the formation of a Christian background culture (‘cultural Christianity’) as a preparation of the gospel. After all, you cannot simply harvest; you must be prepared to work the soil and to sow as much as you can – and to accept that most of the seed will bear very little fruit if any. Also, it is insufficient to merely ‘prophesy’ against the world, with no attempt to provide the world with the cultural repertoire that helps it to understand this prophecy. If they are not prepared to do this cultural preparation, counter-cultural communities are doomed to a sectarian existence. Perforce they will attract mostly dissatisfied Christians from other churches, as they have no clue how to witness to those without a Christian formation. And their public communication will inevitably be characterized by a judgemental attitude and a lack of humility, because their implicit ‘other’ are so-called ‘mainline’ and ‘liberal’ churches rather than the world.

In short, the traditional European folk church and the Anabaptist ‘counter-culture’ are two sides of the same coin. They are predicated on each other like the weekend and the working week, like Carnival and Lent. Both assume a Christianized world that must be Christianized further. The one does so by

uniting the whole population in one structure (the folk church), the other does so by forming an 'anti-structure' as a radical version of the dominant culture (the monastery).⁵¹ The mistake of modern Anabaptists is that they take the rhetoric literally that unavoidably accompanied this structure, like 'pagan', 'world', or 'a godless Babylon'. This creates the false impression that this model is at home in a non-Christian world. By contrast, it seems most comfortable within a (nominally) Christian world, and with 'mainline' Christianity as its opponent.⁵² If copy-pasted into a post-Christian world, the counter-cultural model would merely lead to the abandonment of the public square and the reinforcement of the consumerist view that religion is just another life-style.

4.3 *The Structures of God's Mission*

So the Anabaptist approach leaves us with the ancient question whether Christian mission requires different ecclesial structures alongside the congregation. Here Ralph Winter's proposal about 'two redemptive structures of God's mission' comes to the mind. Winter asserted that there have always been two structures working in the mission of God: the modality and the sodality. The first is open to everybody, and is represented by the parish church or the congregation. The second, however, is open only for those with a special vocation and who are prepared to make special vows. This structure is represented, for example, by Paul's company on his travels, by the medieval monasteries, and by the missionary societies that had emerged by the end of the eighteenth century.⁵³ Without going into detail now, I tend to agree with Winter's analysis, but obviously much ecclesiological work still needs to be done given the almost universal preference in the worldwide missiological conversation for the *congregation* as the single most important instrument of God's mission

51 Interestingly, in most European countries (and possibly also in the U.S.A.) the most vital 'free churches' (drawing on the counter-cultural tradition) can be found in areas with relatively strong Christian vitality (the so-called 'Bible belts'). This illustrates that the 'other' against whom one is defined and from whom one derives one's identity is not so much the secular *world*, but rather the *church* that is (in their opinion) liberal and assimilated.

52 Cf. the thorough analysis of the German free church tradition by Ph. Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission: Eine explorative Studie zum freikirchlichen Gemeindebau im säkularen Zeitalter*, fc. 2019.

53 R.D. Winter, 'The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission', in: R.D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (eds.), *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009; 4th ed.), pp. 220–230. Cf. S.W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), pp. 303–304.

in the world.⁵⁴ Here my intention is merely to point out that the ecumenical acceptance of the church's missionary nature in the twentieth century has largely ignored the question of how the church is to be structured. This has led almost automatically (and rather uncritically) to the exclusive emphasis on the congregation as the 'hermeneutic of the gospel' (Lesslie Newbigin) or other phrasings of the same principle. And this concentration on the local church at the expense of possible other ecclesial structures may be part of the explanation of the popularity of neo-Anabaptist proposals – and of much frustration among pastors about the actual quality of their congregations. Protestants in particular have a task here, as they continue to wrestle with the abolition, at the Reformation, of ecclesial structures besides the parish church or congregation. This neglect of the monastic dimension of the church comes with a vengeance, though, as the counter-cultural church shows.

5 Conclusion

While the counter-cultural church, especially in its neo-Anabaptist expression, has the potential to revive the monastic dimension of the church in a post-Christendom world, it is unlikely that it will be able to carry the weight of missional renewal on its own. In fact, this 'model' is far more dependent on a Christianized society than is often assumed. Taken without its historical companion of the folk church, it runs the risk of creating isolated cells of Christians devoid of meaningful communication with society. Also, and paradoxically, in its idealism it might be quite vulnerable to moral missteps as it is insufficiently accountable to the moral intuitions of God's world.

54 For an extensive ecclesiological reflection on the place of monastic orders in a protestant (Lutheran) ecclesiology, see for example H. Dombois, *Das Recht der Gnade: Ökumenisches Kirchenrecht III* (Bielefeld: Luther Verlag, 1983), pp. 214–232.